Mitchell Says FBI Attended Earth Day to Avert Violence

4/16/71

By Ken W. Clawson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Attorney General John N. Mitchell said last night that the FBI attended last April's Earth Day rally in Washington only to keep an eye on persons with known backgrounds of fomenting violence.

Mitchell said that any suggestion that the FBI is conducting surveillance of political activities of U.S. senators "is just as false as the charge that the FBI is tapping the telephones of members of Congress."

Replying to charges by Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine) that the FBI conducted "general political surveillance" at Earth Day rallies all over the country, Mitchell said the bureau had no interest in any Earth Day rallies as such, "even when it is turned into an anti-Vietnam rally."

The FBI does have a "most legitimate interest in the activities of persons whose known records reveal a likelihood of violence, incitment to riot or other criminal behavior," Mitchell said in a statement issued by the Justice Department, but approved by him in Key Biscayne, Fla.

Advance information on the Washington rally, Mitchell said, indicated that several persons, "including one who was actually out on bail for federal conviction of inciting to riot," were going to attend the rally and that "violent activity was possible, as has happened on other occasions in the past."

Mitchell did not identify anyone by name, but Justice Department sources pointed out that Rennie Davis, convicted of inciting to riot as a member of the Chicago Seven, spoke at the rally and urged his audience to tear down the capitalist structure.

Muskie, in a Senate speech Wednesday, also accused the FBI of spying on 40 to 60 Earth Day rallies all over the nation last April 22.

While Mitchell confined himself to the Washington rally, another Justice Department official said that Muskie was "hopelessly off base" in his broad allegation.

See FBI, A14, Col. 1

FBI, From A1

Of the estimated 60 rallies that day, it is understood that FBI agents attended as few as three or four and for the same reason the Attorney General advanced for their appearance at Washington's rally.

Mitchell said the FBI's presence at the Washington demonstration "related only to the presence of such (violence-prone) persons and the protection of the rights of all citizens, including senators, to engage in peaceful assembly and lawful dissent without violent interference."

He added, "although one senator may feel otherwise, we believe the majority of the American people are reassured by the knowledge that the FBI is doing its job."

The Attorney General said that "one reason the FBI is the most respected investigative agency in the world is that it has steadfastly remained apart from politics and political activity, and has concerned itself solely with threats against national security and violations of federal law."

Justice Department officials emphasized last night that the FBI report on the Washington rally, released Wednesday by Muskie, contained a single sentence relating to the Maine senator. It said that shortly after 8 p.m., Muskie "arrived and gave a short anti-pollution speech."

Muskie's allegations and his call for creation of a domestic intelligence review board, responsible to the President and Congress, to supervise government intelligence, came under attack yesterday in Congress and at the White House.

Presidential Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler said the administration does not conduct surveillance on private citizens at public events and that such activities are "totally repugnant" to the White House.

For the second day in a row, Ziegler suggested the charges by Muskie, Democratic presidential frontrunner, were perhaps "politically motivated."

Senate Minority Whip Robert P. Griffin (Mich.) said the FBI was at the Earth Day rally to watch "such individuals as Rennie Davis."

Griffin quoted Davis as telling University of New Hampshire students this Wednesday night that demonstrators at the forthcoming march on Washington "will occupy the halls of Congress and stay in the nation's capital until the war is over."

"If the government doesn't stop the war, we will stop the government," Griffin quoted Davis as saying.